

# **‘Does the doormat influence the boot?’** Critical thoughts on UK NGOs and international advocacy

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Most UK development NGOs accept that significant improvements in the lives of poor people around the globe are unlikely to be achieved solely by funding ‘projects’ at grassroots level. This is because local initiatives can easily be blocked, undermined, or co-opted by more powerful forces, whether economic or political. Development work which fails to address these forces can expect to have an impact only on the short-term welfare of a small number of poor people. Those forces which emanate from the national or sub-national political economy must be addressed by indigenous institutions; others are international in character, and include the structure of the world trading system, financial and investment flows, energy consumption, technological innovation and intellectual property, and the policies of multilateral and bilateral donor agencies. The increasing internationalisation of decision-making in economic and political fields, and the limited accountability of global institutions, have increased the power of these interests.

Northern NGOs have tried to influence these international forces in order to create a more favourable climate for development in the South. They have largely failed to do so, and this article presents a personal view of some of the reasons which might underlie this failure. I have no wish to attack NGO attempts to exert greater influence at the international level. Rather, as a passionate believer in the importance of NGO advocacy, I am concerned by our collective failure to fulfil our potential in this field, and want to see how we can improve the effectiveness of our advocacy work. Although the article draws primarily on the experience of UK development NGOs (particularly Save the Children Fund (SCF)), the questions it raises apply to other Northern NGOs. The purpose of the article is to raise questions for discussion, not to provide the answers.

## A simple conceptual framework for NGO advocacy

The basic rationale for Northern NGO advocacy is identified as an attempt to alter the ways in which power, resources, and ideas are created, consumed, and distributed at global level, so that people and their organisations in the South have a more realistic chance of controlling their own development. It is useful to distinguish between two different forms of NGO advocacy:

- a. *Attempts to influence global-level processes, structures, or ideologies:* for example, reform of the GATT and the world trading system, or attempts to overturn the 'neo-liberal orthodoxy' of market-led economic growth. These issues raise major questions for powerful interest groups and, in the absence of countervailing public pressure, mere dialogue is unlikely to induce significant change. Successful advocacy on such issues requires a mass base, so that sufficient pressure is exerted on Northern governments, and consequently on international institutions and multinational capital. Advocacy is likely to be confrontational, or at least publicly critical of existing orthodoxies. The stakes are high, not least because of the tendency, in the UK, of this kind of advocacy to fall foul of charity law. Logically, NGOs must call for lifestyle changes among their constituents. The aim is fundamental change.
- b. *Attempts to influence specific policies, programmes, or projects:* for example, UNICEF health policy, or World Bank lending to resettlement schemes. These may be issues where the institution or government is under less pressure from interest groups and therefore accepts, or even welcomes, a dialogue with NGOs on alternative ways of operating – although on 'problem projects', such as the Narmada Dam in India, this is less true. Successful advocacy on such issues requires a high level of technical knowledge, information exchange, and practical experience. This kind of advocacy often takes place behind closed doors, and the NGO concerned will probably not broadcast any success it may have in inducing changes, lest avenues for future influence be closed off. Such advocacy is likely to be based on co-operation rather than confrontation. The aim is incremental reform.

Clearly, this model is an abstraction, and in reality the two forms of advocacy often merge into each other, so that NGO strategies contain elements of both. Some authors argue that UK NGOs will opt for piecemeal reform rather than a more fundamental challenge, because

of the financial, legal, and other constraints that face them (Dolan 1992). In my view, these approaches to advocacy are complementary and mutually supportive. They share a common goal in the long term (system change), but adopt different strategies to reach it, because the short-term issues they address come from different levels in the system which they wish to change. Indeed, it can be argued that one kind of advocacy cannot succeed *unless* it is supported by the other. Hence, detailed policy work is unlikely to be generate significant change unless it is backed up by public and media pressure in the long run: NGOs can easily be co-opted, and the targets of their advocacy may adopt superficial reforms which fail to address more fundamental issues. For example, official donors or multi-lateral agencies may adopt the vocabulary of the NGOs ('empowerment', 'primary environmental care', and so on), while meaning and acting on a completely different understanding of what they imply. The title of this paper – 'Does the doormat influence the boot?' – is a quotation from an SCF Adviser working with government within the context of a World Bank loan for health and population programmes, who is rightly sceptical about the possibility of influencing Bank policy through co-operation in the field alone.

On the other hand, calls for global change are more likely to be heeded if they are backed up by a detailed, rigorous presentation of issues and a credible set of alternative options. It is not enough to present a critique of policy without also demonstrating what might have worked in its place. Rather than posing a dichotomy between 'gradual reform' and 'paradigm shifts', it may be more helpful to see the one slowly leading into the other, or to see the two approaches as complementary. For example, the extension of markets in health and education is a particular manifestation of a more general principle of the neo-liberal orthodoxy. By providing evidence of the impact of markets in particular situations, it may be possible to illumine, step-by-step, the weaknesses of the orthodoxy itself, and to do so more effectively than by mounting a full-frontal attack on the underlying ideology. Linking action and experience at the 'micro' (grassroots) and 'macro' (global) levels is perhaps the single most important element in successful advocacy, a theme to which I return later.

In spite of this, the distinction is relevant, because the two approaches to advocacy *do* have different implications for the NGO concerned, in terms of organisational structure and styles of work. One of the reasons underlying the relative weakness of NGO advocacy has

been a failure to recognise this and make maximum use of the benefits which come from 'synergy' combining different forms and levels of action in mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing ways, within a single strategy for change. In this case, synergy means working simultaneously and in a co-ordinated fashion at local, national, and international levels, both in detailed policy work and in public campaigning, educational, and media activity.

There is in any case a wide spectrum of styles of advocacy, stretching between full-scale public campaigns and informal chats with civil servants in the corridor! It is no exaggeration to say that every staff member in an NGO is an advocate for the agency and its mandate, and plays some role in advocacy somewhere along this spectrum. Rather than seeing advocacy as a distinct activity separate from 'programme work', NGOs need to build all their activities into a single system in which each activity supports and draws from the others. To an extent this is a requirement in the UK in any case, because charity law demands that international advocacy is rooted in direct experience. But there is much more potential synergy here. 'Advocacy' is not the same as 'public campaigns', although campaigns may form one component of an advocacy strategy. Advocacy relates to all the activities of the NGO which aim to influence actors, systems, structures, and ideas – at many different levels and in many different ways. The failure of NGOs to grasp the implications of this constitutes a significant weakness, and is explored in more detail below.

Finally, the real strength of Northern NGOs lies in their simultaneous access to grassroots experience in the South, and to decision-makers in the North. This puts them in a unique position in terms of communicating what is actually happening to people in the South, to institutions in the North, and *vice versa*. This is not without its difficulties, not least in ensuring that the 'voice of the poor' is not distorted. But the potential for Northern NGOs to act in this way is clear. Providing an effective channel for real experience is more important than trying to compete with the World Bank and others in terms of theoretical research – although of course the two are not mutually exclusive. Experience has to be analysed and ordered if it is to have any wider significance. However, there will always be counter-arguments to NGO critiques; and with their hugely greater resources, agencies like the World Bank can develop these at a speed and a level of sophistication which no NGO can match. But what the Bank and others do not have (or are unwilling to develop) is access to accurate

information on the consequences of their actions among real, living people. Neither do the official agencies have the same popular appeal, credibility, and access to the media which NGOs have developed over the last ten years. Potentially, this puts NGOs in a position of great power.

## **What has international advocacy by UK NGOs achieved?**

Most UK NGOs have increased their expenditure on international advocacy over the last five to ten years, although to varying levels and at different times. But what have we achieved? In his review of advocacy in the North, John Clark (1992:197) provides the following list of examples to illustrate some of the achievements of NGOs in this field:

- a code of conduct for the marketing of baby milks;
- the drafting of an essential drugs list;
- removing restrictions on the importation of certain clothing manufactured in the South (such as shirts from Bangladesh);
- establishing an emergency reserve so that EC food surpluses become more readily available for famine relief;
- concerted action on international environmental issues such as global warming and rainforest destruction;
- affording special debt relief to the poorest countries;
- the imposition of sanctions to combat apartheid.

To this rather mixed bag of 'successes' one might add:

- developments in World Bank policy in the areas of gender, participation, poverty, and the environment;
- reversal or modification of some 'problem projects' funded by the World Bank (mostly large dams and associated resettlement schemes);
- a move away from vertical interventions in health-sector investment, especially immunisation (although this year's World Development Report – *Investing in Health* – may reverse this trend);
- improvements in the food regime of refugees and displaced persons;
- modifications in 'structural adjustment' packages to take more account of social impact;

- country-specific initiatives such as reconstruction aid for Cambodia, or joint action (by Oxfam and Christian Aid) to promote access to EC markets for banana-producers in the Windward Islands.

According to Clark (1992:197), 'if it were possible to assess the value of all such reforms, they might be worth more than the financial contribution made by NGOs'. This might well be true, but also begs many questions. What have the achievements of NGOs really been worth? Can even these successes be attributed to NGO advocacy? And is this a cause for satisfaction or for circumspection? Perhaps it is unfair to seek answers to these, given the very long time-scales involved, the dimensions and complexity of the issues, the power of the targets of their advocacy, the relatively small resources devoted to advocacy, and the obvious point that UK NGOs cannot and do not expect to alter international policies or systems *by themselves*. NGOs expect their advocacy to work like a dripping tap, with policy changes coming about over the long term through the actions of many different agencies and individuals. Nevertheless, if we cannot begin to find some answers, strategic planning for advocacy becomes very difficult. Real success will always be hard to achieve when the issues are so broad. But there is always more chance of success when strategy is as strong as it can be. It seems to me that the following conclusions can be drawn from experience to date.

- a. Most achievements have been at the level of detailed policy and/or on issues where NGOs have not come up against strong interest-group pressures (although the adoption of the international code on the marketing of breast-milk substitutes is a notable exception here). Least progress has been made at the level of ideology and global systems – trade, financial flows, and 'conditionality' (the growing insistence of Western donors on progress towards multi-party 'democracy' and respect for human rights). This may not be surprising; but it does reinforce the need to link the two forms of advocacy described above, so that the one supports the other.
- b. Progress on more fundamental issues, such as the conservation of the environment and the impact of structural adjustment on the poor, appears less impressive the more one delves into the details. There have been superficial reforms, but basic ideology and structure remain intact. There has, for sure, been an increasing uptake in the official aid community of the traditional NGO agenda

in areas like popular participation, sustainable development, poverty-focus, human rights, gender, and the 'learning process' approach to development work (Korten 1980). This year's *Human Development Report* from UNDP is a case in point. Even the IMF, in its *World Economic Outlook*, has moved to the use of 'Purchasing Power Parity' rather than GNP per capita, a measure long recommended by NGOs. However, these moves have yet to feed through into practice at the field level.

- c. NGOs may over-estimate their own impact on certain issues (such as 'sanctions to combat apartheid' in Clark's list), where hindsight reveals other forces at work which were more influential. Structural adjustment is a case in point, with at least two other factors – pressure from other multilateral agencies (especially UNICEF), and the political unsustainability of the original package in countries being 'adjusted' – being crucial.
- d. NGOs have failed to build an international movement for development, in contrast to the worldwide environmental or women's movements. While these are very different in character, genesis, and history, both have found successful ways of strategising across national boundaries and interest groups, in ways which have seem to have escaped development NGOs thus far.

Whether the UK NGOs' record on international advocacy is seen as disappointing depends on one's initial expectations, but we should at least register a concern that results have been modest. Is this inevitable, simply a reflection of doing advocacy work in a complex and hostile world, or are there steps which could improve our chances of success?

## **Barriers to successful international advocacy by UK NGOs**

Clearly, the scale and complexity of advocacy issues facing NGOs, and the relatively small resources devoted currently by NGOs to international advocacy, need to be borne in mind in the discussion which follows. It would be simplistic to assume that better results would be achieved solely by increasing the scale of resources devoted to international advocacy. However, I identify four strategic weaknesses in our current approach which require attention:

- an overall absence of clear strategy
- a failure to build strong alliances

- a failure to develop credible alternatives to current orthodoxies
- the dilemma of relations with donor agencies.

## Strategy

NGOs are increasingly concerned with strategic planning, evaluation, institutional learning, and 'distinctive competence'. But how have these concerns been applied to international advocacy work? Of course, evaluation is difficult where there are other forces at work, but it sometimes seems that the disciplines adopted in programme development are neglected in advocacy. The only indicator of success that seems to be used is the number of meetings attended as the same individuals jet frantically from one part of the globe to another! This is not helped by the tendency in some NGOs to separate 'advocacy' from 'programme management' and develop semi-independent advocacy units. Rather than seeing advocacy as an integral part of everyone's job at all levels, advocacy can become divorced from the concerns and priorities of people directly involved in development or relief work (whether staff or local counterparts). This produces a tendency to concentrate on general issues (systems and ideology) rather than on detailed policy lobbying tied to specific circumstances. Consequently themes for advocacy then tend to be determined by the international debate – even fashion – instead of by the work of the NGO and its local counterparts. This makes it more likely the NGO will either be co-opted into the concerns of the wider system, or retreat into ideology. Advocacy becomes *market-driven*, rather than *programme-driven*. Information flows between field and head office are weakened, because field staff do not feel part of one system with common objectives, driven by and supportive of their own work. Without a continuous supply of good-quality information, successful advocacy is impossible. NGOs need to develop a planning process which ensures that themes for international advocacy emerge from genuine priorities in the field. This does not mean that advocacy should be driven exclusively by field concerns, since there will always be trends and initiatives in the international environment which demand a response. However, there must be a clear link between an NGO's advocacy and its direct practical experience, so that influence can be exercised with some degree of authority, legitimacy, and credibility.

The rationale for separating 'advocacy' from other responsibilities seems to be two-fold. First, to be effective, advocacy requires special skills, access to decision-makers, and time. Second, senior managers



may see international advocacy as a particularly attractive area of work because of its high-profile nature, and so attempt to control it. Neither argument stands up to scrutiny: special skills or access may be required for particular styles of advocacy, or for advocacy on particular issues, but there are many other aspects of advocacy where the skills and experience of people throughout the organisation (programme managers, researchers, fundraisers, and communicators) are decisive. Programme staff have the knowledge of local realities and access to decision-makers required to influence the details of policy, while fundraisers and other communicators have the ability and opportunity to enlist wider public support by conveying complex messages in a straightforward way. NGO directors and other senior managers can gain access to high-level bureaucrats and so help to expand the 'political space' within which more detailed work can be developed. The rationale for large and separate advocacy units is less convincing once an organisation sees advocacy as a corporate responsibility in which everyone plays a different but complementary role. This does not, of course, remove the need for overall co-ordination of these different efforts. A degree of centralisation is essential to achieve co-ordination, generate economies of scale (with regard to particular target agencies and themes), and develop a global overview; but, if centralisation is achieved at the cost of wider commitment throughout the organisation, advocacy can be undermined by the absence of a shared vision and understanding.

UK NGOs have generally failed to find the right balance between the two forms of advocacy described above – mass-based advocacy on global systems and ideology, and specialised or technical advocacy on specific policies and projects. Instead, individual NGOs tend to concentrate on one to the exclusion of the other. This might not be a problem if UK NGOs were to work more closely together, each contributing something distinctive to an overall advocacy strategy; but at present no such alliance exists. As a result, neither approach fulfils its potential. In SCF, for example, a huge amount of detailed work goes on to influence the policies of the official aid establishment, not only at the international level but also in the field (through joint missions with donors, staff exchanges, meetings with local aid representatives, information exchange, and so on). However, this is not yet backed by a similar attempt to enlist the support of SCF's huge UK constituency in a general movement for change. On the other hand, concentration on global systems alone is dangerous, partly because the issues at stake

are well outside any possible influence that the NGO can hope to exert. A mass of general material on debt, trade, and environment is constantly being produced, but it is read only by the converted and makes little impact on its ultimate targets in the policy-making sphere because, quite literally, it is 'speaking another language'. A great deal of heat may be generated, but not much light.

UK NGOs face a real dilemma here: on the one hand, if they try to 'speak the same language' as the targets of their advocacy and go about their work quietly and constructively, they risk being co-opted or generating a superficial response, there being no wider pressures for more fundamental change. On the other hand, if NGOs opt for a more radical path, they risk being marginalised, because their recommendations are so far outside the intellectual and ideological framework of the prevailing orthodoxy that they are simply ignored. The logical conclusion is to combine the two approaches.

Finally, UK NGOs have failed to pay sufficient attention to building capacity in the South for advocacy work, either to strengthen the ability of local institutions to advocate for change at national level, or to assist them in playing a more active role in international advocacy. SCF has made some attempts to strengthen the capacity of Southern governments to negotiate more effectively in discussions with donors (Edwards 1991, 1993), while other UK NGOs, especially Oxfam, have tried to help Southern NGOs to develop their own advocacy work. A great deal of effective advocacy takes place within the countries of the South, both directly – such as with the national offices of donor agencies – or indirectly (i.e. strengthening the part played by Southern actors and institutions in a multi-layered strategy for international advocacy). It is in this area – developing alliances for advocacy between NGOs in the North and South – that some Southern NGOs have shown increasing disappointment with their Northern counterparts (Clark 1991). We cannot allow international advocacy to become a self-contained process among Northern institutions.

In summary, what is needed is a proper, multi-layered, and multi-faceted strategy for NGO advocacy which relates themes, targets, objectives, activities, roles, and responsibilities together in a coherent way; which is monitored carefully and evaluated at regular intervals; which integrates detailed policy work with public campaigning; which is rooted in real experience; and which embraces the whole organisation in pursuit of a common cause. Table 1 provides an illustration of how such a strategy might look in theory, in relation to

one current theme: structural adjustment. The importance of advocacy cannot simply be assumed. Its structure must be planned and its impact evaluated in relation to other strategies to achieve impact. This requires much closer and more sophisticated monitoring, engagement, and follow-through, and the development of better indicators (or proxy indicators) of change in policies and attitudes.

## **Alliances**

Although individual NGOs can hope to exert influence on detailed policy issues in which they have a distinctive competence (for instance, SCF in health-systems development), more fundamental issues require a joint approach in order to achieve any impact. Are UK development NGOs prepared to form the kinds of alliance that will be necessary if international advocacy work is to be strengthened? Are they prepared to enter into a 'grander coalition' of development, environment, and other groups to work on the very broad but common issues of global systems and lifestyle changes? There are some NGO networks (such as the British Overseas Aid Group (BOAG), the Aid and Environment Group, Debt Crisis Network, EC-NGO Liaison Committee, and others), but until now their function has been to share information and/or organise joint events at donor meetings, rather than to co-ordinate inter-agency action on global campaigns over the longer term. However, there are some encouraging signs – for example, development and environmental groups worked with some success to shift the UK government's position on 'sustainable development' in the run-up to UNCED, and ran a powerful campaign against proposed cuts in the UK aid budget. Does this herald a new way of working, or is it the exception that proves the rule? The mood of UK NGOs and some international NGOs (and of churches, environmental groups, and even some political activists) may be changing towards a more positive stance on the value of co-operation, but this commitment is yet to be tested in practice.

There are some obvious reasons for the traditional reluctance of UK NGOs to work together: competition (for funds, but stretching into general agency profile), disagreements on ideology and policy, lack of a common vocabulary, differing priorities and so on – and some authors believe that these constraints are insurmountable (Dolan 1992). If this is true, the impact of NGO advocacy at the broader 'systemic' level is likely to be dissipated in a mass of individual approaches. It is a truism that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its

**Table 1: A model framework for international advocacy**

*NB This framework is intended to give a 'flavour' of strategy; it is not intended to be comprehensive. It assumes that the organisation's aim is to replace existing approaches to adjustment with alternatives which generate equitable and sustainable development.*

**Objectives:** to increase understanding of the impact and weaknesses of current approaches; to develop credible alternative approaches; to have these approaches adopted by the World Bank and bilateral donor agencies.

| Levels of action                             | Types of action  |
|--|--|
| Grassroots (programme staff and partners)    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• building concrete alternatives</li><li>• action research to generate information</li><li>• capacity-building among local NGOs and government (research, information, advocacy)</li></ul>   |
| National (country office)                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• strengthen government capacity to negotiate with donors</li><li>• support to NGO federations/networks in developing policy critiques and alternatives</li><li>• join World Bank Missions in the field (take Bank staff into the field, work with them on individual loans)</li><li>• monitor implementation of agreed World Bank policy (e.g. Operational Directives)</li></ul>  |
| Regional (regional office)                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• lobby regional development banks (IDB, ADB, etc.)</li><li>• lobby regional offices of World Bank</li><li>• support for regional alliances</li><li>• Regional Co-operation</li></ul>  |
| International (headquarters: Overseas Dept.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• lobby task managers for specific loans and policy staff on general issues (maximise on-going information flows)</li><li>• work through World Bank/NGO Committee</li><li>• work through UK Executive Director and government officials in London</li><li>• participate in conferences and meetings (e.g. World Development Report)</li><li>• research/publications on macro-level alternatives (including in academic journals, and internal Bank publications)</li></ul> |

| Levels of action                        | Types of action  |
|---|--|
| (communications and fundraising depts.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• staff exchanges and secondments</li> <li>• contribute to World Bank evaluation methodologies, e.g. participatory poverty assessments</li> <li>• strengthen global NGO alliances</li> <li>• development education among supporters, schools, etc.</li> <li>• information to UK Parliament/MPs</li> <li>• increase links with other movements (e.g. environment)</li> </ul> |

parts'; in addition, we need to recognise that alliances could help different NGOs to make more creative use of their different competencies and experience. For example, agencies like SCF have a much deeper involvement in the technical details of policy, because they have their own staff in the field and have tended to specialise in certain areas (such as health-systems development or humanitarian assistance) and in certain approaches (working within line ministries, for example) which give them access to considerable information and experience about what is actually happening as a result of particular donor policies (Edwards 1993). For example, SCF is currently engaged in a programme with FAO to develop a new and much more accurate early-warning system for predicting food crises, based on the integration of quantitative and qualitative data in the form of 'vulnerability maps', the potential benefits of which are immense.

On the other hand, other NGOs (or non-charitable trusts like the World Development Movement) may lack this sort of access, but be able to engage more effectively in public campaigns. If, for whatever reason, the two cannot be combined in the same agency, then at least different agencies can pool their expertise in pursuit of a common set of objectives. Rather than arriving at a consensus based on the lowest common denominator, a more creative approach to alliances would be to recognise and build on the differences which exist among the NGO 'community'. The aim should be *synergy* (working individually but in a mutually supportive way), not *standardisation* (all doing the same thing). UK development NGOs do not yet seem to have learned the lessons of the women's and environmental movements, which have succeeded to a far greater extent precisely because they are *movements*

(not organisations funding projects), able to spread their influence through networks and coalitions of different groups sharing a broadly similar agenda.

## Alternatives

Among official donor agencies, a common criticism of NGOs is that, while strong on criticism, they are short on credible alternatives – or at least on alternatives which are credible to the donors. Advocacy is probably likely to be more effective if positive suggestions are included alongside NGO critiques. This is particularly true in the economic field, where we need to demonstrate that living standards among poor people in the South can be increased without the social and environmental costs associated with existing policies. In essence, this means developing alternatives to the current orthodoxy of global economic growth based on an ever-expanding trading system and ‘free markets’. Because alternatives may involve choices about consumption in the North, the supporters of UK NGOs also need to be convinced of their validity. We do not seem to be making very much progress in this direction.

Of course, it is much easier to criticise the impact of policies which are clearly misconceived than it is to wrestle with the complexities of alternatives. There is no shortage of critiques of the existing system, but people faced with daily choices and decisions need much more than this if they are to make progress. The tendency of NGOs to focus on global-level issues may also reflect a reluctance to look critically at their own practice at the grassroots level. Yet NGOs need to consider very carefully whether they really do have any ‘distinctive competence’ in global-level research. They can certainly innovate and think creatively about alternatives, but real alternatives must grow from action and practical development experience, not from the minds of thinkers in the North. However, NGOs have failed to integrate the work they *have* undertaken on alternative development models at grassroots and global levels. There has been some work on ‘Primary Environmental Care’ (PEC) at local level, and some work on alternative trading systems and energy strategies at global level, but little that ties the two together in a convincing fashion. One of the major weaknesses of PEC is its localism and consequent failure to address issues of policy and power at other levels. Perhaps this is why PEC has been embraced so enthusiastically by the official aid community.

Strengthening links between global and grassroots activity is fundamental if NGOs wish to improve the effectiveness of their

advocacy work, since only when these activities are mutually supportive can lasting change occur. NGO advocacy must grow out of and be informed by grassroots experience if it is to claim to speak on behalf of the poor. However, this is extremely difficult to do. I know of no NGO that has in place systems to collect, channel, analyse, synthesise, generalise, and disseminate information of this sort. In addition, UK NGOs usually base their advocacy work on what their 'partners' or 'counterparts' say, but of course these are a small group whom we select because they agree with us (and we with them) in terms of basic philosophy and objectives. They do not 'represent the poor' in any general sense – nor would they necessarily claim to do so. Northern NGOs must be careful not to use the groups with which they choose to work to legitimise a view of the world in which they believe, but which may not be shared by the broad mass of people in the South. Of course we should not be ashamed of voicing our own opinions (or even those of our partners), so long as we are explicit about 'who' it is that is speaking. However, genuine, credible, and sustainable alternatives must emerge from local debate and action in both North and South, even if the results are more complex and less comfortable than we expect. This is particularly true where the alternatives have a direct impact on people's living standards. In this respect, it is vital to promote the development of wider networks in the South which can be more truly representative of different shades of opinion than is possible if we listen only to 'our' (narrowly defined) partners. The same goes for the North – hence the importance of alliances and coalitions.

## **Donors**

While most UK NGOs see their relations with official donor agencies as involving a dialogue about policy, the donors by and large see NGOs as implementers of projects. There is certainly an increasing openness to working with or through NGOs, but to what end? Part of the neo-liberal orthodoxy is the privatisation of welfare functions previously provided by the state, but the impact of increasing NGOs' role in service-provision seems to be negative in terms of their advocacy. We cannot, after all, bite the hands that feed us and hope to find a meal waiting for more than a week or so! This is less of a problem for detailed influence on policy of the 'behind closed doors' variety, but 'a fundamental choice all NGOs will face is whether to scale-up along the lines that aid donors and host governments prefer, or whether to keep some distance and accept the reduced access to official funding that

this will entail' (Edwards and Hulme 1992: 214). The likelihood is that UK NGOs will make different choices in this respect, something that hangs over the future of alliances between them. Increasing competition for funds may press NGOs into accepting ever more money from official donors, and so bring about a creeping compromise in their advocacy agendas.

## **Some key issues for discussion**

This brief survey of UK NGOs and international advocacy reveals four key issues.

- a. We need to develop a clearer sense of strategy, to evaluate our efforts and learn from experience, so that advocacy work can be refined on a continuous basis. We need to exchange ideas on what seems to work best in different situations or with different targets and themes. We should evaluate how organisational structures and planning systems affect the impact of advocacy. We need to analyse the compromises and complementarities between detailed policy work and public campaigning, and explore how the potential synergy between the two can be maximised. We should embark on a systematic effort to learn from the experience of more successful international movements.
- b. We need to find better ways of linking local-level action and analysis with international advocacy. How can the necessary information flows be developed in ways which do not compromise the legitimacy of grassroots views? How can the voices of real people best be combined with the sophisticated conceptual framework, detailed policy work, and wider public pressure required to induce significant change at the highest levels? The implications of moving into the 'information age', as Clark (1992) puts it, are significant, since NGOs will require people, systems, structures, and capacities to play an effective role in an emerging international movement, rather than a series of country programmes alone. How can we best contribute to the development of wider networks and a stronger capacity to enable institutions in the South to play more of a role in international advocacy, both directly and indirectly?
- c. We need to devote resources to developing viable alternatives to accepted orthodoxies, particularly in the field of economics. This is a particularly good candidate for inter-agency work, because the issues are so complex, and no single NGO can claim a distinctive



competence in all of them. The UK NGO group which is currently trying to harmonise research on structural adjustment might provide a basis for this sort of dialogue on wider alternatives. We certainly need in any case to develop stronger alliances among UK NGOs within this country, linking into broader international networks. Which other issues are suitable for developing such alliances? And how do we persuade UK NGOs to commit themselves to joint strategies?

- d. We must bring our supporters with us as our international advocacy work develops and our agencies change to accommodate new styles of work. This is even more important if lifestyle changes are part of the strategy for change – otherwise our independent support base will gradually be eroded. The implications of UK charity law need to be considered carefully, as does the likely reaction of institutional donors. These factors may slow the pace of change in organisational development, since the choices involved are complex and require careful thought and analysis.

This is a formidable list, but not an insurmountable one. UK NGOs, as part of a wider movement for change, do have the ability and potential to ‘make a difference’, but not unless they adopt a much more critical, creative, and co-operative approach towards advocacy at the international level. Do we want to be the ‘doormat’ or the ‘boot’? The choice is up to us.

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## Note

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